

Transcript

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Vietnamizing the War (1969-1973)

 7 of 11 

December 1968

MUSIC FROM HELICOPTER RADIO: *"You've lost that lovin' feeling. Ooh that lovin' feeling..."*

VOICES ON RADIO: *"See that last hooch down there? See that last hooch?"*

"Yeah."

"Alright, just this side of it, there are four guys with bushes on them. I want you to kill them."

"OK. I'm going to put tracers right here."

"Go!"

BOB HOPE: *I'd planned to spend Christmas in the States, but I can't stand violence.*

NARRATOR: The Bob Hope Show, Christmas, 1968.

ANN MARGARET (singing): *"Dallas, Houston, Memphis, Boston, Atlanta, Denver, Frisco..."*

NARRATOR: Paid with American aid, armed with American weapons, South Vietnamese soldiers on patrol in 1969.

CAPTAIN DO CUONG (South Vietnamese soldier): Foreigners didn't understand the psychology of the South Vietnamese soldiers who were carrying the guns and doing the fighting. We felt we had to fight. We were spilling our blood and suffering all kinds of hardships because we felt there was no other choice.

PRESIDENT NGUYEN VAN THIEU, June 1969: *We never accept any form of government, any form of policy that the Communists would like to impose on us before the decision on all South Vietnamese people can be made through free choice and democratic procedures, without external interference and without atrocities.*

NARRATOR: Pop singers livened up conscription campaigns, welcoming draftees into South Vietnam's armed forces. The military numbered more than a million, but each week more than 2,000 of its troops deserted. Each week more than 400 were killed.

(VIETNAMESE WOMAN SINGING)

"We will never forget you and your fight for freedom" was the refrain.

The South Vietnamese government was recognized by most Western countries. It had survived for 15 years on more than \$100 billion in U.S. aid. It was still totally dependent on America.

BUI DIEM (ambassador to the U.S.A.): We had a lot of conversations about the impact of the huge American presence in South Vietnam. We South Vietnamese, we are very concerned about the fact that the Communists are, were very shrewd in trying to take advantage of the American presence in South Vietnam.

VICE PRESIDENT NGUYEN CAO KY: They said that we are puppets of America, we are working you know, for America, receive money from America, die for America. While they are the true liberators, you know. So, when you look just at the surface, a lot of people listened to their propaganda and believed it.

BUI DIEM: The Vietnamese couldn't think in terms of the Americans intervening in some-thing and not succeeding. When they saw that the Americans build with billions and billions of dollars the air strips in Danang and Camranh -- everywhere around the country -- they couldn't think that the Americans once having committed their troops in Vietnam, having spend so much money in Vietnam, could one of these days leave everything behind and call it quit.

NARRATOR: In early 1969, one-third of the forces defending the Saigon government -- half a million men -- were American.

ELEVENTH CAVALRY IN FIELD, February 1969: *OFFICER: Just pull him over; if anything flies out, watch out.*

NARRATOR: After four years in Vietnam, American combat troops still pursued -- and often caught -- an elusive enemy.

OFFICER: Tell... we'll pick him up there. Hello, got another one over here that's wounded.

Send me an aircraft over to pick up the one that's wounded up. We thought he was dead. He's wounded. Soon as you pick the one up on the stretcher come get the other one. Take him in also. The other fellow died but we gotta get him out of here.

NARRATOR: Every American had his own version of the Vietnam War.

CAPT. FRANK HICKEY: The aviation units in general had a very high *esprit de corps*. The morale was good. We enjoyed what we did. And part of it I think is due to the fact of the logistics of being a pilot.

You know, you go out and you fly your mission everyday, and you take, you know, very precarious chances, but at, you know, you come back home, you have a comfortable hootch. It might be air-conditioned. You got an officers' club across the street where you can get loaded every night and kind of forget about the world. And that kind of made...It was almost like a nine to five job. I mean, if I could put that kind of parallel. Go out and fight, come back and live, almost the way you lived in the states.

LT. BOB FRANCO: All of a sudden from up above on my radio I hear our battalion commander telling me that there were three dinks, his exact words, "There's three dinks to your west. Go get 'em." You know, and I said this must be Bunker Hill, you know. So I said to my men, "Okay, the colonel said there's three dinks to our west, we're going east." Because I always felt never follow them cause that's when you're gonna go.

LT. PETER PAUL MAHONEY: We were on our way back to our base and we were walking through the vill when a soldier came up to the guy who was in charge of patrol, and he had apparently spotted three VC, or NLF, or whoever they were in one of the houses, so we surrounded the house.

BOB FRANCO: And that was, that was the story of go-get-'em, you know. And you don't just go get Charlie. 'Cause he's a little fast.

PETER MAHONEY: None of the South Vietnamese who were in the patrol fired at these three guys, and I was scared stiff. I was suddenly, I was feeling alone because I was the only American who was there and so I, I put my rifle on automatic.

I jumped up and I just fired the entire magazine at these three guys. I killed two of them and I didn't hit the other one and he got away in the darkness.

FRANK HICKEY: There were areas where you weren't supposed to fly over. There were areas where if you took fire you had to call back, maybe all the way back to the commanding general of the division to get permission to fight, to fire back, and to me that was absurd. We're fighting a war. Somebody's shooting at you. You turn around, you shoot back and you kill him.

PETER MAHONEY: The Americans gave a medal to the South Vietnamese soldier who was in charge of the patrol. This is part of, this was considered instilling morale in the South Vietnamese soldiers, so he was given a Bronze Star by the American army because this was like the first body count we had in our area in probably eight months, you know, and the South Vietnamese feeling the need to reciprocate that ended up giving me a Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry.

BOB FRANCO: I was a very lucky person to have the people I had with me, because they got me through it.

You know, I would say to them, "Look, you have one function. That's to protect me. 'Cause I can get you everything else. I can get you the beer in the field. I can get you the air mattresses." Because the people I sent in the rear still had the respect for me. So anything I needed I called in for and got.

FRANK HICKEY: I mean, we had some precarious situations and we lost some birds and we lost some people. But we always won. I mean, we, so

to me, we were very successful, you know. But I, I'm, as I think of it now, I don't know what we won. We won a box on a map where the next day we left it and we never came back maybe. But every time we were engaged in that type of an operation, we won.

NARRATOR: The peace talks in Paris had not stopped the bombing in South Vietnam. American aircraft dropped six times more bombs on South Vietnam than on the Communist North. Many towns and villages in the South were destroyed in order to drive out the Vietcong, the North Vietnamese and their civilian supporters.

The number of northerners captured increased as more of their main battalions moved south. But most of the enemy troops were native southerners fighting in Vietcong units.

The destruction -- much of it deliberate -- created more than three million refugees.

Most American soldiers served with support units during their one-year tours. Their daily routine could be broken at any time by enemy rocket attacks or terrorism.

U.S. bases employed thousands of Vietnamese civilians. The jobs were highly prized. The American-financed war overheated the economy, creating new opportunities, new wealth, and a new commercial class.

NGUYEN NHAN HUU: Between 1967 and 1969, when the American forces were still in Vietnam, it was very easy for everyone to make money. Take a certain Mr. A. who worked for the Americans. He could earn much more working for the Americans than an official could earn from the South Vietnamese government. And since Mr. A. had a lot of money to spend, he would spend it in many ways.

BUI DIEM: It was so easy for everyone to get a share of the pie. That money was so easily available that it very easily corrupted everyone.

MR. NHAN: As for black marketeering, I did not see anything bad at all. When people bought goods from the American supermarkets for resale to make a little profit, then everybody said that this was black marketeering. But, to me, this was not black marketeering. This was only a transaction.

NGUYEN CAO KY: The press at the time tried to blame it on Vietnamese official or Vietnamese people. You know that most of the goods came, you know, that selling of the black market came from the various PX. So, it's wartime and a lot of people, both sides, American as well as the Vietnamese, are involving in the black market, you know. So it created a big, upside down society.

NARRATOR: Christmas, 1969. Nixon was steadily reducing the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam.

In South Vietnam's towns and cities -- swollen with refugees -- the enemy still planted bombs. Civilians still died. But business went on -- all kinds of business.

DUONG THI MY TRUNG (prostitute): I answered an ad in the newspaper for a job as a cashier. While I was working there, the woman who owned the establishment bought me a lot of new clothes. Every time I liked something, she bought it for me. I didn't think that she was going to deduct these things from my salary. But after a while, she began to demand repayment. I became very upset and flustered. I didn't know where I would get the money. Then she suggested that I ought to go with a certain man who would give me money so that I could repay my debt to her.

PROSTITUTE: The man asked me whether I would like to go some place to enjoy myself. I replied that I didn't know where to go, that since my childhood, I'd always been living with my family. Then he suggested that we go to the town of Cantho. I thought we were going to live together as husband and wife. But to my surprise, he stayed with me for only three days, then told me that he was returning me to the woman who was my boss.

NGUYEN CAO KY: Prostitution. Tell me somewhere in this world that there's no prostitution. Tell me some city, some country, where there is no prostitution. So there is prostitution in Vietnam, in Saigon, of course. There is corruption, of course. There is black market, yes. But, because

we're living in war for long time.

Thirty years. And with the vast, the big presence of foreign troops in, you know, in Vietnam, it created a lot of social problems.

LECTURER TO U.S. TROOPS, July 1971: *The first problem we have here is VD. Many of the South Vietnamese women suffer from at least one type of VD. Of course, the best protection here is to abstain from all sexual relations with the South Vietnamese women. However, facts have proven that not all of you will choose to do this.*

SGT. RALPH THOMAS: I don't know if I should tell this story (chuckle), but my first day when I went into town and I got into this Vespa -- they had these little taxis that they called Vespas -- these three-wheeled jobs in which it starts like a lawnmower. I got in and the first thing the guy asked me did I want a girl. I said, "No, I'd like to see the town first." And he said, "Would you like..." and he held up this big pack of what I assumed was marijuana. Now, I know it was marijuana. At the time I just assumed it.

PVT. GEORGE CANTERO: "GI, you want Vietnamese cigarette? I trade you one pack of Salem." Or "GI, can you get me Pham? I give you this, and make enormous dope deals." For a box of Tide, you could get a carton of pre-packed, pre-rolled marijuana cigarettes soaked in opium. For ten dollars you could get a vial of pure heroin about the size of say, maybe about that high, the size of a cigarette butt. And, you could get liquid opium, speed, acid, anything you wanted.

RALPH THOMAS: If I wanted it, it was available. I could either have drugs, I could have a girl, or I could go to any part of town I wanted to. Now, let's say you can turn down a girl or you can turn down going to a bar. I mean, it, whatever the taxi driver said, offered you, you couldn't turn down every one. I mean it was something he said that you were going to want.

BOB FRANCO: The only drugs I actually saw men taking was maybe smoking grass. A little marijuana on a three-day standout. Now, what I would do is when we came, when we came back for a three-day stand-down so to speak, or a three-day rest before going on another operation, I would just say to the men, "Look, go get drunk, do any...find a little Vietnamese girl, whatever you're gonna do. If you're gonna smoke a little dope, don't get caught," you know. "If you do anything worse, don't come back," you know. But they'd, they'd always show up on the third day straight. And, and, they frowned on drugs. My particular company, because they knew out in the field anybody that wasn't alert they could cost the other guy's life.

NARRATOR: In 1971, a Congressional study said that drugs in South Vietnam were "more plentiful than cigarettes and chewing gum." Another report estimated 30,000 American heroin addicts in the country. Narcotics were eroding discipline. Drug abuse, concluded an official survey, had become a "military problem."

SONG: But the pusher don't care if you live or if you die -- Goddam."

NARRATOR: In 1969, more than 9,000 Americans were killed in Vietnam. Nixon aimed to reduce American casualties by Vietnamizing the war, letting the South Vietnamese do the fighting. In 1970, as U.S. troop withdrawals increased, American deaths dropped by more than one-half.

PRESIDENT NGUYEN VAN THIEU, January 1970: *All of the U.S. troops cannot be withdrawn in 1970. It will take many years. Ambassador Bunker, General Abrams, everyone have assured me that the U.S. people and U.S. Government will continue to stay, to mend, to help the Vietnamese people and army to defend the freedom in Vietnam.*

U.S. RADIO SAIGON: *"Good morning Vietnam. Welcome to the time buster...Today is the day..."*

NARRATOR: The total number of Americans in Vietnam continued to drop. But among new arrivals anti-war sentiments were spreading, morale was in decline. Vietnam gave the language a new term: "fragging." In more than 200 incidents during 1970, American troops tried to kill or wound their superiors using fragmentation grenades. After five years in Vietnam, America's armed forces had changed.

FRANK HICKEY: I had an experience and I'll never forget it. I went in,

on payday and the commissaries, well really the PX over there are just mobbed. Everybody has their money for the month, and the lines are really long, and really rank has no privilege. Everybody stands on line.

I came in one time and there was a long line and we were all standing there and a couple of black guys came in and they walked in front of the line. So I said to the one fellow, I said, "Hey boy, you'll have to get back on the line." And I didn't mean it in the derogatory sense. Well, the guy went crazy. I mean, he started to yell at me, "Who are you calling 'boy'? I'm," you know, "I'm no boy," and I don't remember exactly all the things he said to me, but I said to him, "Gee," I said, "look, I apologize." And, I was a captain and he was a PFC. I decided it was time to leave. He was really causing a scene.

So I walked out the back door and the guy followed me. And I turned around to say, "Hey look, I'm sorry," and the guy hit me. I mean, he punched me. And, he was, I don't know, he was about 5'8", 5'9", 120 pounds. He couldn't have hurt me, but in my mind I said, this guy is a PFC. He just hit a captain. I mean, it wasn't him hitting me. It was the whole relationship that I'd grown up with. You know, enlisted men don't hit officers. I mean you go to jail for that.

RALPH THOMAS: The racial polarization was deeper there than I've ever seen. They had black sides of town, white sides of town. And even the Vietnamese accepted it. And woe to the white who walked in a black area unaccompanied, and vice-versa. Woe to the black who would walk into a white area of town unaccompanied.

PRIVATE PHILLIP KEY: I just found myself isolating myself from the white soldiers and things. As blacks we began to associate among ourselves. More so, we began to have political education classes. We began to come together to sit down to talk about, you know, some of the problems that we was confronted with. Our, our commitment.

RALPH THOMAS: For blacks such as myself, it was reading, after reading Malcolm X and black history. Martin Luther King and other, other more black militants, Eldridge Cleaver, etc. It naturally led into a political reading, and I read Dr. Spock on Vietnam. There was anti-war literature in Vietnam. Readily available.

PHILLIP KEY: A lot of guys felt that we shouldn't, you know, risk our life or put our life on the line when there was a war back in America, when we wasn't free, you know, like when dogs were being turned on to our peoples, young children were being bombed in churches. It was very confusing. Most blacks still was, you know, very supportive. Most blacks was very supportive of the system, what they had to do.

NARRATOR: The closer they got to combat -- the more blacks and whites needed each other -- the better they got along.

SINGER AT THE BOB HOPE SHOW: *"How many people here got a lot of soul? You got a lot of soul?"*

"Yeah."

"Right on, right on."

NARRATOR: Bob Hope's 1970 Christmas show played to shrinking audiences. In two years, the U.S. force in Vietnam had been reduced by more than 300,000.

BOB HOPE: *I'm surprised to see you. Where were you fellows hiding when the withdrawals took place?*

NARRATOR: In Saigon, demonstrators protested against the Thieu government. Many favored an immediate peace. Others denounced corruption or sought to discredit the 1971 presidential election. The army fought on.

NARRATOR: Anxious to give South Vietnam a democratic image, American officials searched for an anti-Communist contender to run against Thieu. But Thieu stifled domestic opposition.

To Thieu, like his predecessors, the election was a means to control the population and placate the Americans. President Thieu declared that the election and his victory were an expression of civil rights in a free and democratic society.

The only effective opposition to Thieu was the Vietcong, which now

labeled itself the "Provisional Revolutionary Government." It was active in much of the countryside.

JANE BARTON (civilian aid worker): It would get to be about three thirty, four o'clock and people would say, you know, "It's getting late in the afternoon, you'd better go home because the government's going to change." And literally, the Saigon government sort of closed up and went home and the PRG people would come in, help the people, maybe even work at night, you know, helping to sift the rice or put it in bags, talk to the people, bring them movies or just visit.

They could because, of course, the PRG in the area were not, as people thought, North Vietnamese that had come south, but were really the people themselves. One of the things that was a problem for a foreign government coming in and trying to control an area where it was not popular was figuring out who, who was against the government. Their way of solving it seemed to be to round up groups of people and interrogate them.

NARRATOR: Identifying subversives was part of a broader effort called "pacification," always a key American strategy in Vietnam.

In 1968, America's Central Intelligence Agency started the Phoenix program. Its teams scoured the countryside, rounding up Vietcong suspects.

WILLIAM COLBY (director, Phoenix Program): They're obviously much more valuable to you alive than dead, and therefore, the incentive was to capture them so that they could be interrogated, so that we could learn more about them. Now, we also had a program of trying to invite these people to rally.

We'd put up posters in various parts of Vietnam with a picture of the individual and description of who he was. Wanted posters. Like the old Jesse James ones, but a little different because at the bottom of the poster it said very clearly: And Mr. James, if you will turn yourself in, you will be freed of any punishment for anything you may have done while you were on the other side. And, 17,000 of these people turned themselves in.

MAJ. DANG VAN SON (South Vietnamese Phoenix operative): In Cantho province, we organized a unit of Thien Nga -- wild geese -- composed of young, beautiful high school girls. We infiltrated these girls into the local Communist apparatus, and they provided us with information on the Communists. During the time I served in Cantho, almost all the Communist organizations were neutralized.

NARRATOR: The Phoenix program was managed by South Vietnamese operating with CIA advisers. Thousands of civilians -- men, women, and even children -- were classified as Vietcong suspects. The system relied on a network of informants and secret agents. Communist officials later conceded its effectiveness.

Criticism at the time prompted program managers to turn to public relations. For the news cameras, a search for a husband and wife team of Vietcong terrorists. Despite the public relations, reports of abuses persisted: there were rumors of extortion, blackmail, private revenge, and political assassination.

WILLIAM COLBY: Twenty thousand of the names that we had collected we found were killed. Now, it's on that basis that people have made totally false accusations that this was a program of assassination. Not true. What this was was that we had the names from our intelligence collection and when there was a battle outside the village some night, and people were killed on both sides. We went out in the morning to find out who had been killed on which side, and sure enough Mr. Nguyen who was down as the local guerrilla chief, he had been killed in that fight, but he certainly hadn't been assassinated. He had been killed in a military fight, but he hadn't rallied and he hadn't been captured. He'd been killed and so that was the phrase used. Killed.

CAPT. SIDNEY TOWLE (head of District Intelligence, Vinh Long): The colonel who ran the province who was actually an engineering colonel, created a contest throughout the province, and the contest was among the irregulars in the districts and that was, the team that could bring in the most bodies on a monthly basis would be given cash prizes to

the groups. This just seemed to me totally out of line and I think that it increased the possibilities that many civilians were killed who had nothing to do with the war whatsoever.

WILLIAM COLBY: Now, I'm not going to say that there was nobody wrongfully killed in all of Vietnam during all the years of the Phoenix program, but I do say that the purpose and the effect of the Phoenix program was to reduce and eliminate as far as possible the abuses on the government, although not on the enemy side.

SIDNEY TOWLE: While we were having dinner one evening at our table -- there were five of us sitting in there -- and we had an old French villa we lived in. Well, these irregulars came in with a district village chief just, you know, covered in blood.

They obviously had just come back from a battle. They had five or six weapons and they threw the weapons down. They were just disgusted with the whole situation. They were going to prove something. Came up. Threw a bag on the table and the bag had 11 ears in it. And he just looked at us and he said, "You don't need the twelfth ear," and walked out.

MAJ. DANG VAN SON: Some Americans now in the United States may misconstrue that this Phoenix program was an extremely vicious program designed to neutralize various Communists factions by means such as assassination and illegal arrests. However, the Phoenix program was an extremely effective program and one which enabled us to distinguish clearly between nationalists and Communists by intelligence methods which we had organized.

WILLIAM COLBY: If you torture, you'll get what you want to hear or you'll get something that the fellow invents. If you're clever about your interrogation and use sophisticated systems, you'll learn what the truth is and you'll learn it without any abuse.

NARRATOR: Prisoners were held without trial in hundreds of jails and internment camps throughout South Vietnam.

JANE BARTON: There was no doubt whatsoever that the Americans were responsible, I feel, for the entire prison system in the province where I worked. The Vietnamese knew that. You know, you, they saw all the results of what happened. They were chained to their bed with Smith and Wesson handcuffs. When they were tortured it was either by Americans in the latter sixties, or in the early seventies there would be American advisers there.

SIDNEY TOWLE: My first inkling that anything was going on that I had a problem with was hearing screams from next door and finding out that was their interrogation center and that the way they got their information from these people was with a crank telephone and wiring these people in various manners.

JANE BARTON: They had electric, you know, certain devices that gave them electrical shocks at the interrogation center and these electrodes were attached to sensitive parts of their bodies, and the women that were tortured by electricity were the ones that we saw having the seizures.

And I remember seeing this 67-year-old woman that was lying on a bare bed frame springs, and they had just put cardboard on the top of it with a hole cut in it through which she was supposed to defecate and she had no clothes and just a blanket that the other prisoners had given her.

She had been partially paralyzed because she had such a severe injury to her head. So, I guess that was one of my first impressions was, you know, the real horror of the, of the situation. I mean this old woman being treated like this and how could she possibly be dangerous to the government enough that they had to torture her into being paralyzed.

NARRATOR: Operation Wandering Soul. From helicopters came Vietnamese voices pretending to be from beyond the grave. They called on their "descendents" in the Vietcong to defect, to cease fighting.

Vietnam was deluged with propaganda. In some provinces up to a million leaflets a day were distributed, exhorting, cajoling or warning the peasants to back the government of South Vietnam.

American V.I.P.s -- like Secretary of State William Rogers -- regularly

toured South Vietnam to observe the progress and repeated the official claims that pacification was working. But loyalty to the Saigon government was difficult to measure.

LT. PETER PAUL MAHONEY: The Vietnamese that we were training were very responsive. They asked questions. They were very interested in, you know, in what was going on, and this, you know, made me feel good because, you know, the standard rap on the South Vietnamese was that they, they just weren't interested. They were lethargic and this particular group seemed like very involved in what was going on. So it made me feel good. It made me feel as if I was accomplishing something. We put them through a six-week training program. At the end of the training program the province chief came down and there was a big graduation ceremony and they all got these little colorful neckerchiefs as sort of souvenirs of the whole thing and, you know. It was like this whole sort of media publicity thing about how, you know, these people have been trained and everything.

Then it was about a month after the training program was completed and this graduation ceremony happened that three NLF cadre came into the vill one night, and all 29 of those people's self-defense forces that I trained walked off and joined the NLF, taking all their weapons and all their training with them.

NARRATOR: By 1971, South Vietnamese officials were claiming that the government had won over 95 percent of the population.

WILLIAM COLBY: Pacification involved a lot of other programs. The development of the land reform program. The building of schools, the development of the whole refugee program and the resettlement of the refugees in the areas from which they had come and were now able to go back, thanks to their having some local security.

NARRATOR: Years of fighting had failed to topple the American-supported Saigon government.

In March 1972, a dramatic change of strategy: regular North Vietnamese units crossed the demilitarized zone in force. This time they massed tanks and heavy artillery in an all-out offensive.

NARRATOR: The swift enemy advance left little time for retreat. Along Route One, American advisers had to blow up their headquarters. Taking their colors, and whatever else they could carry with them, they escaped by air.

SGT. THO HANG (South Vietnamese soldier): In fact, we didn't know what was going on. There were American advisers with the 56th regiment. But helicopters suddenly arrived and took them away, leaving behind our commander, who didn't know anything at all.

People called this road the "highway of terror." There were refugees every-where. Then Vietcong tanks came. We realized that we couldn't resist, and we fled toward the sea.

NARRATOR: Amid the retreat, several South Vietnamese army units stood and fought. With no American combat troops to support them, the South Vietnamese army seemed to be fighting a losing battle.

On May 1, the South Vietnamese were forced to surrender the province capital of Quangtri.

President Nixon reacted by mining Haiphong harbor and stepping up the bombing of North and South Vietnam. Along with conventional bombs, the planes dropped napalm.

The North Vietnamese offensive was blunted. Masses of American equipment, and massive American bombing made the difference. South Vietnamese troops prepared to counter-attack. They still needed American help. With their northernmost province in Communist hands, South Vietnamese tactics included amphibious landings behind enemy lines.

The U.S. Air Force and Navy provided air and artillery support. But now the ground war was left to the South Vietnamese.

Stopping the northern offensive did not stop civilian panic. People near the battle zone struggled desperately to get away.

South Vietnamese troops and their families who travelled with them battled for aircraft space.

During and after the spring offensive, battles raged, not only in Quangtri province, but also in the Central Highlands, and in the Mekong delta far to the south. Each week more than 3,000 northern soldiers moved south to join the fight.

The fighting in 1972 was the heaviest of the war. Forty thousand South Vietnamese soldiers died.

The last enemy holdouts in the city of Quangtri finally surrendered on September 15, 1972. That week, for the first time in seven years, there were no American battle deaths. That week more than 5,000 Vietnamese died. The war had been Vietnamized. Over Quangtri city, once home for 80,000 people, the flag of South Vietnam flew again.

CAPT. DO CUONG: After this battle, we became masters of the situation again. The morale of all the soldiers seemed to be high. We seemed to be confident in the fighting ability of the South Vietnamese armed forces -- and in our own unit. We thought that, with continued American help and the support of people everywhere in the world who cherished freedom, we could defend a free South Vietnam by ourselves.

NARRATOR: Crowded Saigon had been spared the enemy offensive. Its population had become accustomed to the war. Then, on October 22, Henry Kissinger informed Thieu that the United States had reached a ceasefire agreement with North Vietnam. The agreement was to be initialed by October 31, a week before the American election. Under the agreement, northern troops could remain in the South, a concession that Thieu had always opposed.

President Thieu refused to sign. He went on television and told the South Vietnamese to keep fighting. The war continued. Without Thieu's acquiescence, the agreement was impossible. Peace seemed far away.

But the South Vietnamese could not easily continue the war alone. The American troop withdrawal weakened the economy. Jobs were scarce. Inflation soared. Dollars were disappearing from a society based on the dollar. The bars, the clubs and the hotels built for the American trade, had seen more lucrative days. But South Vietnam still spent more on imported cosmetics and beauty aids than it earned from all its exports.

Saigon beauty parlors still offered the Western look -- surgery to make Vietnamese eyes round. The Vietcong still exploded their bombs.

As U.S. bombs fell on Hanoi and Haiphong, the remaining American troops watched Bob Hope's last Vietnam Christmas show. At the time, Ambassador Bunker was urging Thieu to sign the agreement, to trust Nixon.

HOANG DUC NHA: Right after the Christmas bombings we were deluged with letters. Almost once every three or four days from Mr. Nixon, care of Mr. Bunker or Mr. Haig that we, the South Vietnamese, should close ranks with the U.S.

And, I remember on the 16th of January when Mr. Thieu gave his daughter away in a wedding, Mr. Bunker wanted to see him to communicate the latest letter from Nixon and that really angered Mr. Thieu. He say, on this day, the happiest day of my life, the most important day of my life, I'm still bothered, you know, with that.

One day later, that's when the pressure came and say, if you don't sign, we go alone. And, that's what the, that's when our political pragmatism dictate to us. He say okay. You know, we're not going to be dumb enough to stand in front of a steam roller.

NARRATOR: America had viewed Vietnam as a crusade, as a challenge, and finally as a burden. Now like the Chinese, Japanese, and French before them, the Americans were leaving.

BUI DIEM: The Vietnamese couldn't think in terms of the Americans intervening in some-thing and not succeeding, and so it is a kind of blind trust that the South Vietnamese wrongly or rightly put into the Americans. They couldn't think that the Americans -- once having committed their troops in Vietnam, having spent so much money in Vietnam -- could one of these days leave everything behind and call it quits.

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